



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

LESSON 133 –THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: THE MYSTICAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 140-160

KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL

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The Mystical Sense

- ▶ The mystical sense of Scripture, or allegorical sense, examines the Scripture to see how people, events, and literal things point to Christ. This means that there may be several levels of understanding needed as we see a literal event that actually happened and yet serves to demonstrate a truth about Christ.
- ▶ Not all passages have a spiritual or allegorical sense, yet there are many passages that use real, visible things to point to invisible truths and eternal realities.
- ▶ Some go too far in one or another direction regarding the mystical sense, one hand claiming all Scripture is mystical, or on the other hand that all Scripture is only to be taken literally. These are both hermeneutical errors.

The Mystical Sense

- ▶ In seeking to discover the mystical sense, the interpreter must keep in mind that:
- ▶ 1. Scripture itself contains indications of a mystical sense. For example, the New Testament interprets several Old Testament passages messianically, and in so doing, not only points to the presence of the mystical sense in those particular passages, but also intimates that whole categories of related passages should be interpreted in a similar manner.
- ▶ 2. A symbolical relation exists between the different spheres of life, in virtue of the fact that all life is organically related. The natural world is symbolically related to the spiritual world. For example, in Ephesians 5 Paul points to marriage as a mystery indicative of the relation between Christ and the church.

The Mystical Sense

- ▶ 3. History is characterized by dioramic unity, in virtue of which analogous events often re-appear, though it be with slight modifications, and these repetitions are, more or less, typically related. Israel was a typical people, and the history of that ancient people of God is rich in typical elements that point to truths of history and also truths of spiritual reality.
- ▶ 4. A close connection between the individual and communal life clearly reveals itself in lyric poetry. In the Psalms, the sacred poets do not sing as detached individuals, but as members of the community. They share the joy and sorrow of the people of God, which is, in the last analysis, the joy and sorrow of Him in whom the church finds its bond of union.

The Mystical Sense

- ▶ The mystical sense of the Bible is not limited to any one book of the Bible, nor to any one of the fundamental forms of God's revelation, as for example, prophecy. It is found in several Biblical writings and in historical and poetical, as well as in the prophetical books.
- ▶ Its character can best be brought out in brief discussions of 1) the symbolical and typical interpretations of Scripture, 2) the interpretation of prophecy, and 3) the interpretation of the Psalms.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ God has revealed Himself to us in words and in facts. The words explain the facts, and the facts give concrete embodiment to the words.
- ▶ In Christ, we find the perfect synthesis for in Him the Word was made flesh (John 1:14).
- ▶ All the facts of the redemptive history that is recorded in the Bible center in that great fact. The various lines of the Old Testament revelation converge towards it, and those of the New Testament revelation radiate from it. It is only in their binding center, Jesus Christ, that the narratives of Scripture find their explanation.
- ▶ The interpreter will truly understand them only insofar as he discerns their connection with the great central fact of Sacred History.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ The interpreter must discover the underlying meaning of such facts as the call of Abraham, the wrestling of Jacob, Israel's exodus from Egypt, etc. Full justice must be done to the symbolical and typical character of Israel's history.
- ▶ Moreover, in the interpretation of the biblical miracles, it should not be forgotten that they are closely connected with the work of redemption. In some cases, they symbolize the redemptive work of Christ; in others, they prefigure the blessings of the coming age.
- ▶ In a word, the interpreter must determine the significance of the facts of history as a part of God's revelation of redemption.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ Facts may have symbolic significance. Historical facts or events may serve as symbol of spiritual truth. A symbol is not an image, but a sign of something else.
- ▶ Examples include the wrestling of Jacob with God (Gen. 32:24-32), and refer to this in Hosea 12:2-4. This is not understood until we see Jacob's wrestling as a real event that symbolizes that even as heir to the promises of Abraham, Jacob wrestled with God all along to try and gain success by his own strength and cunning. By being disabled, his career of self help and resistance to God was shown to be futile and he had to resort to the use of spiritual weapons, namely prayer, in order to obtain the blessing of God. His strength had to be broken that the power of God might become manifest in him.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ Another example is found in the miracle recorded in John 6:1-13, where Jesus miraculously fed the 5000. To regard this miracle as merely proof of the Lord's power is to miss the point as much as the crowd did. They lost sight of the fact that it was a sign, pointing to the sufficiency of Jesus, as the bread of heaven, to satisfy the hungry souls of men. Christ Himself clearly reveals the significance of this miracle in His discourse at Capernaum on the following day.
- ▶ The Scriptural miracles are often symbols of spiritual truth.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ Facts may have typical significance. When Abraham offered up his only son on Mount Moriah, he performed a typical deed.
- ▶ David, as theocratic king, was clearly a type of the Messiah who would be his descendent.
- ▶ The serpent lifted up in the desert pointed to the lifting up of Christ on the cross.
- ▶ The high priest entering the inner sanctuary once a year to make atonement for the sin of the people pre-figured Him who in the fulness of time entered the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption for His people.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ We must then ask 2 questions: 1) What is a type? 2) What rules apply in its interpretation?
- ▶ 1) What is a type? The word type refers to the impression of a stamp, hence a figure or an image. It can also refer to an example or pattern. Both types and symbols are indicative of something else.
- ▶ A symbol is a sign, while a type is a pattern or image of something else.
- ▶ A symbol may refer to something past, present, or future, while a type always prefigures some future reality.
- ▶ A symbol is a fact that teaches moral truth. A type is a fact that teaches a moral truth and predicts some actual realization of that truth.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ When interpreting types, there are 3 characteristics generally given:
- ▶ 1) There must be a notable real point of resemblance between a type and its antitype.
- ▶ 2) The type must be designed by divine appointment to bear a likeness to the antitype. There must be some Scriptural evidence that it was so designed by God, and not merely a naturally occurring resemblance.
- ▶ 3) A type always prefigures something future.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ The interpretation of symbols and types follows the same general rules of interpreting parables.
- ▶ 1) The interpreter must guard against the mistake of regarding a thing that is evil as a type of what is good.
- ▶ 2) The proper way to understand a type is found in the study of the symbol. What truth did the symbol convey to Israel? Was it realized on a higher level in the New Testament?
- ▶ 3) The New Testament gives us real insight into the truth that was typified by the Old Testament symbol.

Symbolical and Typical Interpretations

- ▶ 4) It is a fundamental principle that types, which are not of a complex nature, have but one meaning, hence the interpreter is not at liberty to multiply what the type signifies.
- ▶ 5) It is necessary to have due regard to the essential difference between type and antitype. The one represents truth at a lower level, while the other, the same truth on a higher level. Moving from type to antitype is always a move from lesser to greater.

The Interpretation of Prophecy

- ▶ Some of the most difficult problems for the interpreter are found in the prophetic literature of the Bible. We must avoid 2 errors when dealing with prophecy.
- ▶ 1) Prophecy is not simply the history of events before they come to pass. However, its literal fulfillment should always be expected.
- ▶ 2) Predictive prophecy is not the fruit of intuition or divination, but revelation.
- ▶ Therefore, prophecy is the declaration of what God has revealed.

The Interpretation of Prophecy

- ▶ Special characteristics of prophecy:
- ▶ 1) Prophecy as a whole has an organic character. They present us with what appears to be a bud that at some point will open into a beautiful flower.
- ▶ 2) Prophecy is closely connected with history and must be seen in its historical setting to be understood. The prophets message was first to their contemporaries.
- ▶ 3) Prophecy has its own peculiar perspective. The element of time is a rather negligible quantity to the prophets. The prophets often compress great events into a brief space of time, seeing great events in a single glance.

The Interpretation of Prophecy

- ▶ 4) Prophecies are sometimes conditional and the outcome depends, from a human perspective, on the actions of men. (Jer. 26:17-19; 1 Kings 21:17-29; Jonah 3:4, 10).
- ▶ 5) Though the prophets often express themselves symbolically, it is erroneous to regard their language as symbolical throughout. They did not construct a sort of symbolical alphabet to which they habitually resorted in the expression of their thoughts. Context indicates when an expression is symbolic, therefore the language of the prophets should be understood literally.
- ▶ 6) The prophets clothed their thoughts in forms delivered from the dispensation to which they belonged – from their life, history, and people.

The Interpretation of Prophecy

- ▶ 7) Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the prophets occasionally transcended their historical limitations and spoke in forms that point to a more spiritual fulfillment in the future. In some prophetic passages spoken to Israel we find a message meant for the church, for example.
- ▶ 8) Sometimes the prophets revealed the Word of the Lord by actions – Isaiah walked barefoot through Jerusalem; Jeremiah hid clothing at the Euphrates; Ezekiel had to lay on his left side 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days; and Hosea married a wife who became a harlot.

The Interpretation of Prophecy

- ▶ The words of the prophets should be taken in their usual literal sense unless the context or the manner in which they are fulfilled is clearly indicative that they have a symbolic meaning.
- ▶ In studying the figurative descriptions that are found in the prophets, the interpreter should make it his aim to discover the fundamental idea expressed.
- ▶ In the interpretation of the symbolic actions of the prophets, the interpreter must proceed on the assumption of their reality. They really happened.
- ▶ The fulfillment of some of the most important prophecies come in installments, with each fulfillment pointing to a yet future fulfillment.
- ▶ Prophecies should be read in the light of their fulfillment, for this will often reveal depths that would otherwise have been missed by the interpreter.

The Interpretation of the Psalms

- ▶ The Psalms, sacred poems and songs, form a part of the Word of God. Didactic poetry gives instruction and lyrical poetry influences emotional and spiritual experiences.
- ▶ The Psalmist expresses his innermost feeling and experiences to God. In most of the Scripture, God is speaking to man, but in the Psalms we find man very often speaking to God.
- ▶ The poet writes or sings about their own historical circumstances and of their personal experiences. These experiences do involve a representative character, revealing a solidarity of mankind as a whole.
- ▶ As a result the Psalms in a very real sense are universal and transcend geography and history.

The Interpretation of the Psalms

- ▶ Rules for interpreting the Psalms:
- ▶ 1) If there was a historical occasion for the composition of a psalm, this should be studied.
- ▶ 2) The interpreter should study the character of the poet and the frame of mind in which he composed his songs. David is not the only Psalmist!
- ▶ 3) Psalms are to be presumed to be the utterances of a regenerate heart.
- ▶ 4) In the Messianic Psalms, a careful distinction must be made between the parts of the psalm that are messianic and those that are not.

The Interpretation of the Psalms

- ▶ 5) In connection with the Imprecatory Psalms, certain facts should be taken into consideration:
 - ▶ a) Sometimes sin is represented in the form of the sinner.
 - ▶ b) These Psalms desire the vindication of the righteousness and holiness of God.
 - ▶ c) They are not utterances of personal vindictiveness, but of the church's aversion to sin, embodied in the sinner.
 - ▶ d) They are, at the same time, a revelation of God's attitude to those who are hostile to Him and His Kingdom

Conclusion

- ▶ The mystical sense of Scripture, or allegorical sense, examines the Scripture to see how people, events, and literal things point to Christ. This means that there may be several levels of understanding needed as we see a literal event that actually happened and yet serves to demonstrate a truth about Christ.
- ▶ Next week: Lesson 134 - The Implications (Implied Sense) of Scripture.